

# Boston Health Coach

healthy eating, juicy living, guilt-free self-care

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### Notes from Christi Lehner's 'Winter Blues' Teleclass January 18, 2005

Make sure to check out my [Winter Blues Survival Kit!](#)

#### What are the Winter Blues? If you have the Winter Blues, you may:

- Feel bored and restless - like you have cabin fever or are stir crazy
- Be irritable, grumpy, or tense
- Crave sweets and eat more than normal lots of emotional eating
- Feel lethargic - sluggish - hard to get moving
- Be sad or down or moody
- Feel fatigued - sleeping (or wanting to sleep) much more than normal
- Lose interest in sex
- Have trouble concentrating

#### Why do we get Winter Blues?

The fact that the winter blues occur when the days grow shorter is not a coincidence. Sunlight is crucial to our health, and when we don't get enough exposure to sunlight our mood and our health suffers.

Why does this happen? When you're out in the sun, your serotonin levels go up. Serotonin is the hormone in our bodies that elevates our mood. In the winter, we don't get much sunlight, so we don't produce as much serotonin. The result? We feel blue!

There's another hormone that's affected in the winter. The sleep hormone - melatonin - which is produced by the pineal gland in our brain - is also affected by light and dark. Melatonin is the hormone that lets our body know it's time to sleep. When it's dark, your melatonin levels increase.

So, if you find yourself getting tired these days when the sun sets at 4:30 in the afternoon - when you still have 1-2 hours of work left - that's due to the increase in melatonin.

In winter, we not only have low levels of serotonin (the - feel good - hormone) but our melatonin (the - sleep - hormone) kicks into gear earlier in the day, making us tired sooner. No wonder we feel a little out of sorts during winter!

#### How about celebrating Winter?

Winter is really an amazing season, one that is totally different and unique and special from all the rest.

Chinese medicine believes that the seasons have a very profound cyclical effect on human growth and health. Chinese medicine says that we are influenced by climate changes and we should live in harmony with them.

Yet most of us don't change the way we live during the winter. We go about our days in the winter as if they're like spring, summer, fall days. We keep going,

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just as quickly, with the same diets, the same bedtimes, and the same workout routines.

It's no wonder we have such a hard time during the winter! It's no wonder we have intense cravings at night for warm, comforting rich foods, because it's cold outside and yet we're still eating salads, cold yogurt, and fruit every day for lunch during winter! It's no wonder we have cabin fever, because we don't go outside in the fresh air like we did during snow days when we were kids!

As winter draws closer, our blood starts to thicken. We start to feel more introspective, and we start to store our energy and strength. The cold and darkness make us seek inner warmth. Winter is a time to draw inwards, to trust ourselves, to tap into our intuition. It's a time to rest, meditate, and store a bit of extra weight.

But to do that we need to slow down a bit, and relish the warmth of our homes and breathe in the briskness of the air!

## How to Avoid the Winter Blues?

Winter is a time for hibernation, for warming yourself up, for cuddling, staying in, and being a bum! Use these ideas to help you enjoy staying inside during winter:

- **Go to bed earlier than normal.** Even if you can't fall asleep right away, the important thing is to get horizontal and give your body a rest. Try napping on the weekend afternoons, too.
- **Buy a hot water bottle** (just like grandma used to have). Take it to the office to warm your belly during the day. Fill it up with hot water and put it at the foot of your bed before you retire for the night.
- **Take a hot shower or bath.** This is a great transition activity. After I meet with my clients, or do my lectures, I come home and have a hot shower.

Exercise is a natural mood booster, and it keeps us from feeling depressed in the winter. Here are ways to get moving this winter:

- Do you have the **right equipment and warm winter clothing**?
- Do you belong to a **gym**? Or do you have **outside workout options**?
- Exercise works best when it's something you look forward to, so **choose something that fits your personality** and fitness level. Dancing, kickboxing, yoga and brisk walking are all great ideas.
- Do you have a **buddy** who can help motivate you? If not, check out [exercisefriends.com](http://exercisefriends.com). How about talking on the phone while you walk, to catch up with friends? How about walking to drop off dry cleaning or buy stamps? Kill two birds with one stone! Then you can go home and get toasty WARM.
- How about- **aiming small**? - Only commit to walking, then run if you feel like it. Decide not to work out at all, then go to the gym if you feel like it. Do a gentle yoga class instead of your typical cardio routine, and then see if you have more energy to do some time on the bike.
- Try a **"winter sport"** to get you outside and moving. How about snow-shoeing, snowboarding, ice skating, or cross-country skiing? How about doing yoga in a heated room? Buy a few workout DVDs that you can do from the comfort of your home.

Food can offset Winter Blues. Which foods are best in the winter?

- Eat a lot of **soups, potatoes, and warming foods**. Instead of eating raw spinach and veggies, try sauteing them in olive oil instead to warm them up. Have stew!
- You may find yourself craving **comfort foods** like bread and mac & cheese. That's because these carbohydrate kind of foods raise serotonin levels. Remember, our serotonin levels decrease in the winter, because we don't get as much sunlight. So our body tries to compensate by craving carbs and sugary foods. This is our body's way of boosting serotonin levels - Keep these comfort foods in your diet in moderation - use them as rewards for working out.
- Have **healthy snacks** in the afternoon when your blood sugar levels drop. Try sweet potatoes baked with pecans and honey. Try whole wheat pitas dipped in hummus or salsa. Try trail mix with raisins or dates. Try an apple with peanut butter. Yogurt with granola and raisins. Oatmeal with nuts. Olive spread on whole grain crackers. Use the [Healthy Snack List](#) to find some snacks that will work for you.
- **Bitter and salty foods are helpful**. They promote sinking, centering quality, which cools the exterior of our bodies so we notice the cold less. Base your winter diet around foods like oatmeal, brown rice, buckwheat noodles, endive, turnips, asparagus, alfalfa sprouts, aduki beans, dark leafy greens, carrots, parsnips, winter squash, and berries. To flavor your foods, try soy sauce, a little salt, sauerkraut, garlic, green onions and ginger. These spices will heat your body up.
- **Winter cooking styles**: use ones that promote warmth and strength and comfort. Slow-simmer, pressure-cook, bake, or saute. Serve warm!
- Foods that **stress** your body during the winter are dairy foods like ice cream, cold foods and drink, too much raw food, sugar and honey, over-salting.
- **Omega-3 fatty acids** are very helpful in getting rid of depression. You get these from tuna, salmon, walnuts, sesame seeds, olive oil, and flaxseed oil. You can also also try fish oil or cod liver oil.

### How to stay positive/upbeat during winter?

- Get out at lunchtime and look at the **sun**. You'll be amazed at how much better you feel with a few minutes of natural sunlight sprinkled throughout your day. Our depression is often caused by lack of sunlight.
- Buy a **full-spectrum lamp** that will cast natural sunlight into your office or bedroom. Full-spectrum lighting that replicates the same healthy "ingredients" in natural sunlight. It will boost your mood. Check out mercola.com or Happylite box from Verilux.
- Take a **snow day**. Remember how exciting it was to be stuck at home during a blizzard when you were in school? Mother Nature uses winter to force us to slow down, go inside, and get quiet. Set aside a - well day - from work where you stay home with nothing to do, nowhere to go, and no one to bother you. Don't use this day to run around doing errands - use it as a recharge and refresh day. Plan it into your schedule so you can take full advantage of it. I guarantee you'll be twice as productive when you head back to work the next day.
- Get thee to a **beach**! Taking a beach vacation while everyone else is in the snow makes you giddy! A beach trip should be on your to-do list every winter. Just two days in the warm sand and sun will revitalize you, I promise!
- **Organize your living space** (clearing clutter can be calming for your mind)

**And above all else, make sure you stock yourself with a [Winter Survival Kit](#)!**

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